



SAFEGUARDING AS GOSPEL IMPERATIVE

Human Dignity at the Heart of Christian Mission

Fr. Stanislaus Alla SJ

In the last few decades 'Safeguarding' has emerged as a major global concern and many efforts are made by individuals and families, by the Churches and religious organizations, Governments as well as many other groups so that together we can ensure the safety of children and vulnerable adults. Sexual abuse crisis, highlighted in the media or remains unrecognized or hidden, opened our eyes and arrested our attention -calling for urgent and collective response. On its part, the Catholic Church has been in the forefront in confronting this crisis. While many attempts are there to 'cover up or deny' the abuse, the Church is doing its best to face it and come up with policies so as to overcome it.

For us Christians, more than anyone else, it is the person of Jesus who inspires us to confront this grave concern. Life and teachings of Jesus, his example, the way he cared for the children and the vulnerable women, and the way he questioned those who abuse others offers us a model. The Gospel accounts give us many examples in this regard. Salvation includes bringing healing and wholeness, and, ultimately, all long for this, including the victims and perpetrators and those who strive to build a safer world. The Jesus we encounter in the Gospels challenges us to take the ministry and mission of Safeguarding seriously so that the world we shape will be better and safer than the world we are born into.

[What is 'Human Dignity' and why is it crucial for our understanding of ourselves, the others and the ministry of Safeguarding?](#)

Human dignity has emerged as a fundamental and foundational principle in the last one hundred years, more than in the past, and it has enriched both scholarly and popular conversations. Major documents published by the Vatican, the United Nations and the Constitutions of many countries illustrate how important and indispensable human dignity is if our civilization is to advance and prosper. Those looking for a detailed history of the notion of human dignity can read *Dignitas Infinita*, approved by Pope Francis and published by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Vatican, on 8 April, 2024.

20 January 2026

Drawing upon the Bible, the following paragraphs describe, in an informal way, what human dignity is and why it is important to understand its meaning and implications so that the ministry of safeguarding becomes stronger.

The creation accounts, described in the opening chapters of Genesis, teach us that we are made in the 'image and likeness' of God. In one way or the other, the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) share and uphold this truth. We are familiar with this: that God created other creatures by his word, and then God made us, the humans, in a very unique way. Though we are shaped out of dust, God's very breath gave us life. Therefore, while we share creatureliness with the others, we are made for an entirely different purpose. We are created to live with God for ever, in joy and in peace. Sin, of Adam and Eve, and ours, ruined our lives. In spite of this, God did not give up on us but sent Jesus, to call us back to a new life, to share in God's very life.

Few words in the Bible have richer meaning than 'image and likeness.' Scripture scholars strive to explain the meaning and implication of these words. Among humans two qualities stand out: reason and will, or, in other words, knowledge and freedom. We share several features with the other animals but in possessing reason and will, we are said to be unique. Many cultures describe God as omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. It means that God has all power, complete knowledge and is able to be present everywhere at the same time.

God knows everything but, in his wisdom, God gave us (shared with us) this power, the capacity to know. We know that a table is a table and fire is fire and that fire burns if we get closer. Our knowledge is deeper than this. We can have a sense of the past and the future and make plans for our wellbeing: for instance, we can build wonderful houses and keep on improving so that we can have stronger and safer houses. Based on the knowledge, personal and shared, accumulated and passed on, we have built a civilization that is intended to look after the wellbeing of all.

Also, knowledge helps me to know that the person in front of me is poor and that I can do something for his welfare.

More importantly, knowledge helps us to know what is right and good and what is wrong and harmful. Without the gift of knowledge, we cannot imagine a world that we live in today. Of course, several of us use our knowledge to harm and destroy ourselves and others but that is not what it is primarily meant for. Knowledge is gifted to know God and to belong to God; and at the relational/responsible level, to do good and to avoid evil.

We are creatures, but analogously, we are a bit God-like in possessing knowledge and freedom. We are able to know who God is, understand God's revelation and participate in God's divine plan. Psalm eight announces this truth. It says that we are made 'a little lower than God,' and crowned with 'glory and honour.' God shared his knowledge (though partially) with us and it is an extraordinary gift. Without possessing a share of God's knowledge, we will not be fully humans.

The second quality that makes us unique is our will. It may appear to be a dry word but it makes us what we are and only with this we end up becoming what we are meant to be. God is love, God loves us and love is God's precious quality that we are endowed with. We are gifted with this quality so that we can love God, love ourselves and love others. Will helps us to choose to love. I can choose not to love but to harm others and that is where freedom comes.

God's Will desires the wellbeing of all, all the time, period. It includes ourselves and others, including those we may not like. That is where we are unlike God, and our will is unlike God's will. God's will consists of pure goodness. God's will desires the good of all, those who are doing well, those who are struggling, and those who are moving away from God. Our will, while being good enough, is marked by sin and selfishness.



Our will desires the good of those who are good to us, whom we love and care for, but ignores others or actively desires evil for some. Knowingly or unknowingly, when we pray that God's will be done, fundamentally we are stating, and accepting, that what ultimately matters is God's will and that it be realized fully, apart from our wishes.

'Knowledge' as God's gift is extraordinary: it implies that we can know God, follow his plans, know what is good and evil, and finally strive to do good and avoid evil. Similarly, God's gifts of will and freedom are extraordinary: God gave us unusual gifts, the gift of love and other gifts, so that, by participating in his qualities, we can also will the way God wills. We are invited to expand our hearts so that we can desire the wellbeing of all.

Christians believe in Trinity and, being made in the image and likeness of Trinitarian God, we are asked to treat others as equals and love the others, unconditionally.

Simply put, we are invited to relate with others the way the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit relate to each other. In light of divine revelation and as we advanced as a civilization, we have discovered who we are, who the others are, who God is and what is expected of us.

Since we are made in the image and likeness of God, we are endowed with the qualities of sanctity and dignity that are indelible and inalienable. These qualities, the gifts of sanctity and dignity, are given by God and we are born with them. They are innate, which means we are born with. Since they are engraved into myself, enshrined at the core of my being, they cannot be separated from me and taken away, for any reason. When we buy a piece of land from the others, the land is set to be alienated. Our dignity cannot be alienated. The good and evil we do shape our lives and destinies but dignity remains, always, and independently. No one gave me dignity and no one can take it away from me. Even in the case of a criminal, his basic human dignity is not erased.

One never ceases to be human at any point of time. Obviously, for one's wrong, one has to be punished but one's fundamental dignity does not go away.

The Scripture makes it abundantly clear that **God gave us human dignity and it is non-transferable, non-reduceable and non-removable.** We treat all human beings, from the moment of conception till natural death, with respect and look after them because they are created with dignity. **We have intrinsic worth because of this dignity, not simply because we have talents or we are clever or we are loveable.**

Because we have this innate dignity, anything we do to harm others is wrong. Using power and muscle and wealth many have enslaved others in the past and continue to do so even now. The Bible repeatedly reminds us of how Yahweh freed Israelites from slavery, and Jesus desires to free the chained.

Many treat other people as means: meaning that you are there to work for me, to serve me. Across the world many think and believe that they are entitled to be served. Also, many think that the others are not their equals. For instance, for millennia men subjugated women and did not allow them to flourish as God's children.

Human dignity has become central to the way we measure ourselves, how civilized we are. **God created us and endowed us with dignity and any attempt to deny dignity to any person, is an attack on God's plan.** Torture, violence, abuse etc., simply illustrate how far away we have gone away. On the one hand our history tells that we are capable of doing enormous harm to each other and, on the other hand, we are astonishingly capable of caring for each other, even to the extent of sacrificing oneself for the wellbeing of others.

Safeguarding genuinely flags an important area in our lives, inviting us to confront the evil of abuse and foster a civilization of love and care and support. Human dignity, as a principle, empowers and enlightens us to get into the details of Safeguarding and to know that we are dealing with human beings, especially with those whose dignity is violated. Jesus reminded us of our dignity, especially the vulnerable ones, and thereby showed us a path!



Stanislaus Alla, S.J.,
Vidyajyoti
23, Raj Niwas Marg
Delhi, 110054, INDIA